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THE DECAY OF NEW ENGLAND THOUGHT.

IN what belongs essentially to New England thought, it is universally remarked that we are at the point of pause. The best-known thinkers and writers are mostly at the seventies, and have long since expressed their vital thought, while the positive and constructive elements in American life and letters have scarcely yet appeared. New England thought is at the point of suspense, if not of decay; at least, work is fully done upon the old lines of thought, and fresh lines have as yet hardly been constructed. The direction of thought, not less than the accentuation of culture, changes in every generation. The general culture of to-day is better than it was yesterday, but the clear, resolute, incisive thinking is less than it used to be. In political studies, in philosophical thought, in religious vitality, in the general movement of literature, the day is mostly barren of fruit. Quite enough books are printed, but those by American writers in few instances deal with questions or interests which vitally concern the people. Has New England lost its ancient power of guiding the intelligence and the conscience of the country? Is there an actual decay of the significant forces of New England thought? Have the outside parts of the country gained upon what has made New England a distinct power in theology, in politics, in hard thinking, in the criticism of life? The time has come for answering these questions, and the answers reach down to what is deepest in the convictions of this section of the country.

It is generally conceded that the fundamental element in the life of any community is its religious belief. This is most real, most permanent, most decisive of what is in man; it is the truest expression of his personality. For this reason, the analysis of thought in New England begins with the con-

victions which have directed the religious life of the people for three-fourths of a century. Calvinism has been the distinctive influence. Under other and various names it has always been the ruling element in the direction of human life. It has stood for the absolute sovereignty of God, and kept the distinction between God and man, between good and evil, at a sharp point through all the centuries. Christianity clothed this principle in the gospel of humanity, but did not conceal its power. Whenever great thinkers have come forward, the questions which Calvin stirred are the questions which they stir; the sovereignty, or, better, the personality, of God is the fundamental point in their thinking. In New England during the eighteenth and in the early part of the nineteenth century, the great dogma of Calvin, with both preachers and people, was the single conviction which ruled the thought of the community. It has made every generation great that ever held it, and it made New England great among the people of the country. It gave direction to thinking; it gave religion a purpose; it gave to every man a definite and serious aim in life. It imparted to the whole community that high seriousness which in England, as in America, has been the chief historical contribution of the Puritans to the development of Christianity in modern life. In New England this Puritan principle, half-truth though it was, became a directive force. It organized society upon a Calvinistic basis. It was severe, one-sided, sure sooner or later to be a curse to human nature, but for more than two centuries it was destined to give to New England the leadership of thought in America, and to mold, as in the hollow of one's hand, the destinies of a great people. This is the glory of our Puritan epoch. It made great men, great leaders. It secured civil liberty for the citizen. It energized the forces that strengthen American life. It developed and controlled the civil and religious elements in New England to such a degree that they took as positive direction in politics as in religion, and, joining hands with Presbyterianism in the Middle States, became a directing influence in the chief parts of the whole country.

Calvinism held this ground in the New World after a unique fashion. It was separated from catholic belief, whether in the Roman or Anglican churches. It developed freely. It was itself. But the party never rules mankind for long without missing the aid of the party which is its complement, and the Calvinistic party

crystallized in its religious dogmas at the same time that it was working freely as an organizing element in our politics. Here, early in the century, the division came. In exalting God, the Calvinistic party debased man, and there was no prophet, when the dogmas about God became absolute, to point out the danger of the hour. Calvinism had missed its opportunity, was in fact nothing but a bundle of dead dogmas, when Channing, in 1819, boldly unfurled the banner of revolt. The reaction from one-sided and uncatholic teaching had set in, and those who withdrew from the great standing order of New England included the best preachers and the best people. It is related that when Lyman Beecher, the patriarch of the last decade of the Puritan fathers, as Dr. Park is the last of their theologians, witnessed, in 1815, the downfall of the standing order in Connecticut, he returned to his Litchfield parsonage, and sat down to a sorrow which refused to be comforted. He saw the end. President Wayland, in another Christian family, also saw what was coming. The overthrow of Puritanism, and of the evangelical organizations which grew out of it and sprang up around it, was only a question of time. The Episcopal Church, now a directive force in New England thought, had then nothing to say, and would not have been allowed to say it if it had. The hopes of the new period centered in the Unitarian body—in its culture, its intelligence, and its enthusiasm for humanity. It had fine scholars, essayist preachers, an army of writers, but never the consciousness of sustained and enduring power. Channing was its great ethical teacher, but, unlike Edwards, who gave system and strength to Calvinism, was too much of an intuitionist to be anything more than the head of a body of religious sentiment-
alists. Unitarianism has not a single great name in philosophy or theology. It found expression in a school of literature, but has never shown at any point, with all its beautiful and practical interest in the amelioration of humanity, anything like the religious strength and invincible purpose of the religious commonwealth from which it sprang. Measured at the bar of historical justice, it has done nothing positively in the religious world; it has lived for itself, and is now dying in the act of self-commemoration. Its religious publications have been chiefly a criticism of orthodoxy, and it has not, in half a century of existence, known whether it had a distinct work to do in the world or not. Every honor must be bestowed upon its distinguished ministry, of

which Dr. Peabody, the foremost living teacher of ethics in New England, is chief; but the two younger men now apparently most honored in its ranks and representative of its tendencies are M. J. Savage and John W. Chadwick, both of whom long since honestly gave up Christianity for the ethics of evolution or the beliefs of the reason. It is with regret that no better result of its ethical teaching can be traced.

There arose, forty years ago, partly within this body and partly without, the transcendental movement, which is best described as an attempt to express the purpose of a religious life in the terms of spiritual philosophy. It embraced in its circle many original and remarkable men, and has given to New England a distinctive school of thought, and some of our best literature. It was felt that Puritanism, then regarded as gone to seed, had done something to show the immanence of God, and the thought of the movement was to find God, not in His measureless sovereignty, but in the organization of life, in the intuitions of experience, in the activity of outward nature. This is the groundwork of the transcendental literature. It was the assertion of a vague spiritual philosophy against the hard-headed Puritan and the soft-headed Unitarian. Ripley, Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott, Margaret Fuller, gave transcendentalism its power, and Theodore Parker, an honest man who had the courage of his convictions, carried the transcendental purpose into politics and great moral questions, and stood by the gun that fired the second shot "heard around the world."

Now, in this analysis, brief but directive, may be seen the origin of the great changes which have had to do with New England thought. They are traced back to their roots in religious convictions, in issues which are now matters of history. The leadership of thought in this country belonged unquestionably to the Puritans. In the state, they had their full quota of statesmen; in the church, they chiefly dictated the religious convictions of the nation; but their large liberality in politics became the narrowest bigotry in religion. They gave up for party the truth meant for mankind. They had no philosophy; even Edwards accepted the positions and conclusions of Locke without dispute. The legend has been either a "Thus saith the Lord," or the characteristic declaration, "I think." It has been an attempt, from the very beginning, to base Christianity upon rationalism. The consent and witness of the catholic church has never been

considered or asked for. The Puritan leadership failed, because it was the leadership of a half-truth, which neglected at least one-half of man's nature. The Unitarian leadership failed, because it eliminated that belief in the Son of God as the Son of man which is the first principle in every Christian movement. The Transcendentalists failed, because their spiritual philosophy was subject to each one's dictation—as changeable as a summer sky. The various evangelical families in New England failed, because they are only part and parcel of the old-fashioned Puritanism, now degenerated into pietism on the one hand or sentimentalism on the other,—which is its representative attitude to-day. The religious influences in New England, whether orthodox or Unitarian, have been negative for a good portion of the century. They have been fluctuations of opinion. They were—and are—departures from positive positions. The old orthodox and the early Unitarian positions gave something positive, for the moment; but all later developments have been negative. Transcendentalism survives now only in a few fossils of literature, and is chiefly remarkable as indicating a step in the development of Emerson. Unitarianism has no strength to resist the encroachments of free religion; the current evangelicalism, the living representative of the old Puritanism, is nothing but emotional pietism, too weak to command the respect of many who still adhere to it. The following which Joseph Cook obtained in Boston came from this quarter, and painfully indicated the amount of thought which these people had applied to the serious problems of life. The Monday lecturer's rationalism was as much thinner than Parker's, whom he assailed, as Parker's was wide away from Channing's; and his efforts to harmonize evangelical teachings by the scientific method exposed their inconsistencies anew to intelligent minds. The agnosticism which now prevails in New England is the result, in part, of this general inability of the existing religious systems to place Christianity upon a definite and catholic basis, and adapt the expression of its principles to the needs of the present religious thought of the people.

The analysis of these successive developments in religion shows that, since Calvinism lost its hold upon the New England mind, the fortitude and strength of its thought has gradually decreased. The old Puritan theology is unreadable to-day, but it never lacked fiber and nerve, and had the period been one in which pure literature could have flourished, the strongest and

best literature would have been the result. Webster grew to manhood under that old dispensation. Calvinistic Dr. Hopkins of Newport set Channing to thinking when only a boy. The decrees of God had to be explained to the mind and obtain the assent of the will. The robust pulpit helped to train robust men, and, outside of pure literature, many great thinkers of to-day—Peabody, Woolsey, Parks, Hickok, Shedd, Mark Hopkins, and others—received their mental direction in this quarter. The New England statesmen and theologians of the first half of the century were bred under the sledge-hammer logic of the earlier system, and got their vitality as thinkers from this source. But since that day of strength, the old Puritanism has lost its power in the successive disintegrations of belief, and the latest development is pessimism among thinking men, and something worse than pessimism among those who do not know how to think.

These changes may also be distinctly traced in literature. They are the atmosphere in which literature lives. Writers of prose or poetry obtain no hearing, unless they express what is vital and personal in the thought of the people. This points to the reason why American literature came to a pause at the close of the civil war. We have never had a school of American letters. So long as religious thinking had dignity and character, its influence was felt in political and theological writing; but, if we except Cooper, Emerson, and Whittier, no American author of the elder period can be said to have grown out of American soil, and made his way to fame with the marks of the soil upon him. The prominent writers now ending their careers can hardly be called American authors. With very few exceptions, there is nothing characteristically American about them. Bancroft, with an American subject, follows Gibbon, *longo intervallo*. Irving is the American Goldsmith. Ticknor, Prescott, and Motley, proud as we are of them, always wrote for English readers. Parkman is the only historian who has been distinctly American in his subject and in its treatment. Longfellow is American in "Miles Standish" and "Evangeline," especially so in "Hiawatha"; but Percival years ago detected the European flavor of his earlier poetry. "Hiawatha," far more than "Evangeline" and "Miles Standish," is an American poem, and shows the author at his best. It has Emerson's merit of sincerity. The author does not go to Europe. The great defect of our literature has been its insincerity. This was felt by Richard H. Dana, as long ago as when

he was editor of this REVIEW, and attempted to cast out Pope and similar tricksters of style from Harvard and organize an American school of letters upon the basis of a spiritual philosophy. Dana's volumes indicated the higher direction for American literature. They are imaginative and thoughtful, in the best sense. Emerson and Hawthorne, widely different in mental constitution, brought original force into literature. Whittier has left a definite mark; Lowell has a secure place. These men were sincere in their art and in their religion. They had a work to do, and went straight to the doing of it. It was chiefly in the transcendental period that our literature reached absolute sincerity of expression, and responded to the convictions of the people. When the civil war was over, literary exhaustion followed upon political exhaustion, and the time for creative work had gone by. It is more and more evident that the end of the war was the close of the old period, and that between then and now has come the time of pause. The old men are now dreaming away their lives; but the young men have not yet seen visions.

This is an analysis of the decay of New England thought as exhibited in literature and life. But the political development has not been treated; the forces of heredity have not been discussed; the influence of the scientific method upon the pietism of the orthodox or the sentimentalism of the liberals has not been traced. The historic forces have been followed in two lines, but these almost include the others. The changes in religious belief are fundamental in society, and give direction to life, while the developments of literature follow the ethical trend and organize the conceptions of the people at large. If this analysis is correct, the decay of New England literature and religion is due to causes which are always operative. The permanence of any literature is in proportion to its depth in the soil. It is rightly said that a distinctive American literature scarcely yet exists. Our writers have not met the conditions of its existence. Their productions have been raw and ephemeral. Webster and Seward and Sumner are the only names one can mention in earlier political literature. In theology there is not a name after Channing's that has any vitality in it. In philosophy there is nothing. In literature it is quite uncertain who among the fathers will be read by the next generation, and it is a thankless task to draw a line between the living and the dead. The common judgment sends many an author to his grave before he is dead. Literature

fails when it is divorced from the interpretation of life, and religion fails when it is divorced in Christendom from catholic tradition. In these respects literature and religion have both failed in New England, and the time has come when the failure is plain to every thoughtful mind. It is confessed because it can no longer be denied, and the causes are as open as the fact. Failure was inevitable from the beginning. It came because neither literature nor religion has done the full work assigned to it in the development of national life. But failure is not defeat, and the darkest hour is not far from the dawn of the new day.

In forecasting the future, it must be conceded that the strength which has gone into theology, philosophy, and literature is enormously disproportionate to that which has gone into affairs. This is one reason for the present dearth of leading men of thought. There is no one to succeed Professor Park among the younger men of the body to which he belongs, and there is not the ghost of a sign that any deep thinking is going on in the evangelical organizations associated with it. The field is a vast, dreary something—God only knows what, and the agnostic field, if the men like John Fiske now applying themselves to resolute thinking be excepted, gives little ground for hope. There must be the organizing force of a spiritual philosophy behind the activities of life if American literature is to contain the elements of power. As Lessing gave direction to thinking in Germany and prepared the way for Goethe and Schiller, so the thinking in America must become spiritual and personal before literary work in any large and high sense can be produced. The philosophical thinking with us has been chiefly confined to President Marsh and Dr. Hickok. President Porter is an excellent critic of philosophy, but, like Henry James, discusses the systems of others when he ought to be developing his own. Dr. Bushnell set up for a philosophical theologian, but had the fatal peculiarity of leaving off in his thinking where he ought to have begun. He has added nothing to American thought. The great need in New England to-day is the organization of religious thought upon a catholic basis. The organization of thought precedes the direction of life. The Puritan party, with all its successive degenerations into manifold individualism, needs this historical and catholic basis, joined with the largest openness to what is best in modern thought, if its strong personality is ever to unite, as once it was united in England, with the great

historical institutions by which society is maintained and individuals are built up into freedom and righteousness. This does not mean so much a return to the old ecclesiasticism as a return to positive and spiritual thinking—a return to the broad and honest convictions of all sensible men. The force that has come from Calvinism has failed to organize religious institutions, and does not contain the historical elements on which they must always be based. It is at this point that the reconstruction of our thinking begins. The reconstruction has to do with theology, with philosophy, with literature, and with art. The new and vital statement which reconciles the age with the truth it is searching for is the old catholic belief, explained by the spiritual philosophy which is its counterpart. This is the restoration of the long-lost key to New England thought—the key without which there can be neither breadth nor strength in theology, philosophy, or literature. It is here that Dr. Mulford's "*Republic of God*," one of the most organizing and directive books of the century, meets the movement toward the reconstruction of religious and philosophical thought. It marks the first time, since the great Puritans were in power, that a positive basis has been found in spiritual philosophy for the thinking of the age, and it is the emphasis of this new ethical intention, furnished by theology and philosophy, which finds unconscious expression in all that is best in literature and art. William T. Harris and his associates, in introducing Hegelianism into New England thought through the Concord school of philosophy, are broadening and deepening the basis of our thinking. The younger men at Harvard are working out the problems of philosophy anew. Perhaps there never was a time in the history of New England, or of the country, when so many men of the first ability were working their way, silently and alone, toward a constructive and philosophical basis for the revelation of the Christ as now. They do not write books, but the process of thought is constant and manifold. The literary movement, if behind the religious questionings, is more and more American, more and more something sincere and inevitable. The artists are obedient to the same law of development. The nation only awaits a better religious settlement to prepare the way for a better, richer, broader, more characteristic literary development than has yet been reached. The new literature, the new spirit, must come through fresh conviction, through wider sympathies, through a

deeper sense of the eternal in daily life. The conviction of the personality of God as the groundwork of the personality of man leads the way to the religious settlement, and organizes men upon the basis of universal truth. The larger sense of ethical relations awakens a new interest in current thought and life. The ethical sense in literature and art is found in that loyalty to truth which develops the power to express it; and in literature the highest aim is reached when it is identical with all the interests of life. These are the directions of the new epoch now beginning, and are the earnest of the future.

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